

How a Revolutionary Was Born

BY

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Carl Skoglund's early life as a militant worker in Sweden prepared him for leadership in the 1934 Teamster Strikes.

The Minneapolis Teamster Strikes of 1934 still capture the imagination of radicals around the world. The militancy of the strikes and the strategic and tactical brilliance of its leaders — the Dunne brothers, Carl Skoglund, and Farrell Dobbs — have cemented them as models for socialist leadership.

Skoglund, the oldest and most experienced of the trio, stands out in particular. Dubbed “the General” for his strategic acumen, Skoglund mentored many of the people who exercised decisive leadership in the 1934 strikes, as well as the over-the-road organizing campaigns involving hundred of thousands of drivers that followed.

Skoglund wasn't born a general — he became one by fighting in the socialist movements of two countries: Sweden and the United States. Yet it was his youthful years in Sweden that formatively shaped his lifelong revolutionary politics.

Carl Skoglund was born Karl Andersson in 1884 in the tiny Swedish village of Rönningen near Bengtsfors. Even by the standards of nineteenth-century country life, Rönningen was a primitive and isolated village, bearing a striking resemblance to Grimm's Fairy Tales. His village, little more than a homestead, lacked newspapers, a railroad station, or even roads — only walking paths cut through the thick forests.

Skoglund changed his name after getting his first job at a saw mill and encountering a grumpy payroll clerk, who declared: “We have too many Anderssons and Johnsons. Pick another name.” He chose Skoglund.

Growing up in Rönningen, Skoglund’s daily life revolved around his immediate family. His father, Johannes Andersson, was a jack of all trades: simultaneously a carpenter, blacksmith, and gun-maker. His mother, Ida Gustafson, spent most of the day cooking over a huge fireplace that also heated the family home. He had four brothers and two sisters.

Amenities were sparse. “We never had any pottery,” Skoglund recalled in an interview in the 1950s. “He [Skoglund’s father] made all of the kitchen utensils out of wood, on an improvised wood lathe that he made himself.” At night the family would gather around the fireplace, where Skoglund’s mother and father would tell stories about the demons that inhabited the forest.

Life, however, was about to change forever. “My generation became the break between the old semi-feudal life and the new industrial life,” Skoglund said.

Industrial moguls like munitions manufacturer Alfred Nobel led the way in reshaping Swedish society. Nobel — the man who invented dynamite and created the peace prize in his name — not only built large munitions factories but operated large sawmills. And lumber companies bought up the forests from large landowners.

At the age of twelve, Skoglund left school and, following in his older brother Richard’s footsteps, found work at a new pulp mill in nearby Skåpafors owned by the Ekman family. Like the Nobels, the Ekmans spearheaded the rise of Swedish industrial capitalism, supplying timber for a paper- and lumber-hungry world. While employed at the pulp mill Skoglund became a socialist and active trade unionist.

In 1984, in an interview with the Swedish socialist magazine *Internationalen*, veteran leftist and trade unionist Johan Eriksson described life in the mill. “The working conditions were grueling and dangerous,” he said. “We worked twelve-hour shifts, from 6 to 6. The owners, Ekmans, were notoriously anti-union.”

Eriksson remembered Skoglund as one of the most radical young workers, and as someone “who always wanted to know where things stood.” This element of Skoglund’s personality, wanting a straightforward, honest assessment of any strike or campaign — “to know where things stood” — stayed with him for the rest of his life.

Around the age of twenty, Skoglund joined the Social Democratic Party of Sweden and became active in its youth section (the Young Social Democrats) — both of which were affiliated with the Second International, the main grouping of Marxist parties around the world at the time. Especially important was the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), which led the Europe-heavy Second International in both size and cachet. Headed by Karl Kautsky —sometimes referred to as the “Pope of Marxism” — the SPD was particularly influential in the Nordic countries.

One of the movement’s bedrock principles was internationalism: the idea that workers should support each others’ struggles across borders, and, especially in times of war, refuse to fight each other.

The Internationale, the anthem of the international socialist movement, always sung in rousing choruses at party conventions and important socialist holidays such as May Day, encapsulated the sentiment well:

No more deluded by reaction
On tyrants only we’ll make war
The soldiers too will take strike action
They’ll break ranks and fight no more.
And if those cannibals keep trying
To sacrifice us to their pride
They soon shall hear the bullets flying
We’ll shoot the generals on our own side.

An early test of Swedish social democracy’s internationalism came in 1905 when the Swedish king, Oscar II, threatened to wage war on neighboring Norway. Since 1814 Norway and Sweden had been bound together in a political union in which Norway retained a parliament with limited powers but was controlled by the Swedish monarchy. In June 1905, the Norwegian parliament dissolved the union, and King Oscar mobilized for war.

Skoglund and his brother Richard were called up for military service and sent to an army camp near the Norwegian border. Meanwhile, the Swedish Social Democrats spearheaded the opposition to King Oscar’s war. Party leader, and future prime minister, Hjalmar Branting coined the slogan “Hands off Norway, King!” and led an antiwar demonstration of twenty thousand people against the Royal government.

The Social Democrats held meetings and peace demonstrations across the country despite being painted as seditious or even treasonous. In Skåne, the southern-most county in Sweden, one party district sent a message of solidarity to comrades in the Norwegian Labour Party, expressing their “warmest support for the Norwegian people’s struggle for independence.”

The social-democratic newspaper *Arbetet* went even further, declaring that Swedish workers would rather “make common cause with Norway and crush the tyrants in Sweden” than serve the interests of the Swedish upper class.

It was the Young Social Democrats, however, who gave the antiwar movement its crusading zeal. Zeth Höglund, one of the emerging national leaders of the youth affiliate, ecstatically recalled five decades later the early days of the movement: “The new youth movement advanced like a wave of storms across the country. There were no obstacles for the young people at its head; no goal lofty enough for them not to want to make it a reality.”

Even before the war mobilization, the Young Social Democrats had big plans. They hoped to build one thousand clubs with fifty thousand members by the end of the year.

“We must conquer the country!” wrote Fredrik Ström, another prominent youth leader, in the premiere issue of the youth newspaper *Fram* (Forward). Höglund went one step further in the pages of *Fram*, declaring, “Let us make Swedish social democracy the strongest in the world!”

The war mobilization gave the group an opportunity to spread its wings. The Young Social Democrats’ first congress assembled in Stockholm from June 11 to 13, the very days the war crisis erupted. Eighty delegates representing clubs with seven thousand members and a newspaper with a circulation of twenty thousand met in open defiance of the government.

Meanwhile, labor-affiliated newspapers in both Sweden and Norway printed Höglund’s manifesto (“Down Weapons”) in both languages, on one hundred thousand leaflets. It had an electrifying effect. During the summer of 1905, antiwar agitation continued to course through the Swedish working class.

In one of the more famous public protests against the war, thousands of sawmill workers walked off the job in southern Hälsingland and in northern Gästrikland, and gathered in the tiny town of Ljusne to protest against war with Norway.

In October 1905, war was averted when the Norwegian and Swedish governments signed an agreement recognizing Norway’s independence.

It was the widespread agitation, Swedish historian Hakan Blomqvist says, that helped prevent military action:

My opinion is that this contributed to there being no war. You also have to remember the world situation here. At the same time there was the first Russian revolution, which had broken out as a consequence of Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese war. So there was unease in the upper classes that a war in Norway would unleash social disturbances.

Blomqvist sees a wider significance of these events:

[The] Swedish and Norwegian workers' movements had shown that the struggle for peace could yield results. This whole mobilization against became a kind of proof for the Second International that the workers' movement could stop war, which was dashed in 1914.

What role did Skoglund play in the antiwar campaigning of the Young Social Democrats?

Much of this history has been clouded by time but in a sworn statement made before an immigration inspector in Minneapolis in January 1941, six months before he and other organizers were indicted for violation of the Smith Act (a 1940 law that made advocating, or participating in groups that advocated, violent insurrection against the government a criminal offense), he told the inspector, "I served part of three years in the [Swedish] army, and had disciplinary action resulting in confinement in barracks."

An pivotal event for Skoglund's generation was the defeat of the 1909 General Strike. Perhaps better thought of as a lockout, the monthlong action occurred amid a deepening recession that sapped the strength of the labor movement and emboldened the Swedish Employer's Association (SAF).

Still, nearly two hundred thousand workers employed by SAF struck, and received fortification from another one hundred thousand unorganized workers. It was an incredible show of strength, and a historic opportunity for the Swedish working class.

But outward appearances can be deceiving, and tactical blunders by the leadership of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation resulted in, as Blomqvist says, a "crushing defeat." The experience had a conservatizing impact on the Social Democratic Party and the labor movement, and many of the youthful militants of the Swedish socialist movement began to look abroad.

One of them was Carl Skoglund. He left Sweden in 1911, more than three decades before he would play a pivotal role in the Minneapolis Teamsters Strike.

“When I landed [in the United States],” Skoglund said later, “I was twenty-seven years old and had very rich experiences in the political labor movement.”

He put those experiences to good use in the United States, joining the ranks of the many immigrant socialists who have invigorated the US labor movement through the years.

CONTRIBUTORS

Joe Allen's latest book is *The Package King: A Rank and File History of United Parcel Service*.

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